

**TESTIMONY PRESENTED
BEFORE THE HOUSE AGRICULTURE SUBCOMMITTEE ON
DEPARTMENT OPERATIONS, OVERSIGHT, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY
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Mr. Chairman, my name is James Garner, State Forester of Virginia and Director of the Virginia Department of Forestry. The Department's mission is that "We protect and develop healthy, sustainable forest resources for Virginians". Since our beginning in 1914, the legislative mandate and the agency's number one priority has been to protect the lives and property of our citizens and the forest resources from destructive wildfires.

I appreciate your kind invitation to share some of our efforts as we proceed to implement the National Fire Plan in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Congress has made emergency-contingency funds available for Community Assistance to expedite efforts aimed at restoring areas destroyed and damaged by the 2000 fires and protecting communities in the high-risk Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) from future fire damage.

USDA Forest Service, State and Private Forestry programs will play a major role in the successful implementation of the National Fire Plan. It is through State and Private Forestry programs that the Forest Service will be able to most directly offer technical and financial assistance to the communities impacted by wildland fire and help them to accomplish the mitigation of future risks. Virginia has a long and successful history of cooperation with our federal partners, local governments, and rural fire departments.

Cooperation and Collaboration

In 1999, the Virginia Multi Agency Coordinating Group (VMAC) established a dispatch center in the Virginia Department of Forestry Central Office in Charlottesville. The VMAC group members are: USDA Forest Service, National Park Service, US Fish and Wildlife and the Virginia Department of Forestry. VMAC has served both in-state needs and National dispatch. Over 600 Virginia firefighters were sent to the western fires, through this Coordinating Center.

The VMAC group also shares the cost of a helicopter stationed at Weyers Cave Airport, near Harrisonburg, Virginia. The Weyers Cave airport is a critical location for successful air attack in the Northern Shenandoah Valley, where many mountainside woodland developments are located.

The dangers of forest fires to the woodland homeowners in Virginia are not new phenomena to the Department of Forestry. Beginning in 1991, the Department and the USDA Forest Service cooperatively sponsored the Wildland Urban Interface Demonstration project in Shenandoah County, Virginia. This unique pilot project was the model in developing the National Firewise concepts in use today.

Virginia also began surveying woodland home developments in 1979. Five successive surveys have shown a steady increase. The latest (1999) survey shows a 28 percent increase in woodland home development. Currently over 173,000 homes are listed on the survey with a potential of an additional 103,000 to be built in the future. This information is significant as we plan to implement on the ground projects under the National Fire Plan grants.

The State and Private Forestry programs are important to the states in helping us meet our agency strategic goals. The Department of Forestry Strategic Plan identifies and addresses many of the same goals and objectives that are desired outcomes of the National Fire Plan. The recent funding by Congress will allow the Department to achieve the goals of our Strategic Plan and the National Fire Plan in a more efficient and timely manner.

In 2000, a competitive grant process was established in cooperation with the State Foresters to implement hazard mitigation projects with a portion of the Cooperative Fire - State Fire Assistance funds. That initial effort proved to be a success. Virginia received an \$85,000 training grant. The grant provided the “Virginia Wildland Urban Interface Training Initiative” which was designed to improve the skills and knowledge of personnel from numerous local fire departments throughout the State. The project involved instruction at a fire suppression and management course in Orkney Springs, Virginia. Over 80 firefighters representing 20 local volunteer fire departments attended the training in October 2000.

The WUI training funds will also allow us to establish the first Wildfire Academy in Virginia. In May 2001 eleven different forest fire suppression courses are being offered over the span of six days, designed to train 175 students per day at Fort Pickett, Virginia. This training enhances the skills and abilities of a community fire department to work closely with the Department of Forestry and federal agencies to reduce losses from wildfire. The scope of the initiative was expanded to involve fire departments whose jurisdictional response area is adjacent to Maryland, West Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina. These adjacent States will also benefit from this training in coordination and reduced fire losses. Program partners in the Wildfire Academy include the Virginia Department of Forestry, Virginia Department of Fire Programs, Virginia State Fire Chiefs Association, U. S. Forest Service, National Park Service, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Maryland Forest Service, West Virginia Division of Forestry and the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation.

National Fire Plan 2001 and Beyond

The protection of life and property is the primary motivator for the US Department of Agriculture and the Interior to provide additional resources for firefighting activities to ensure that fire suppression efforts are at maximum efficiency. Firefighters must continue to be well trained to accomplish this difficult and dangerous job, as well as be supplied with proper equipment. Safety of the firefighters and the public must always be the number one priority.

Appropriate technology will be provided to conduct proper planning, prevention, detection, information, education, and training.

Since much of Virginia's forests are privately owned, the need to protect these lands from uncontrolled fires through a fully-coordinated rural fire response system falls to the Virginia Department of Forestry and the rural volunteer fire departments. The federal lands in Virginia total just over two millions acres and are intermingled with the private forestlands throughout western Virginia.

Many communities across Virginia are adjacent to forested lands, which have been subjected to a series of natural disasters. These events have substantially increased fuel loads and hazards within the communities and in adjacent woodlands. Several ice storms, southern pine bark beetle, and gypsy moth in the mountains have killed thousands of acres of timber, which contributes serious fuels to the forest floor.

This accumulation of heavy fuels allows the fire to burn with greater intensity, creates erratic fire behavior, and hinders initial fire attacks. This condition has created extremely hazardous situations for fire fighters, and in places, limits travel of firefighters and equipment. When these fuels are near communities or woodland developments, the risk and potential for disaster increases at exponential rates.

The George Washington–Jefferson National Forest is one of the largest National forests east of the Mississippi River. It stretches the length of western Virginia. The Shenandoah National Park and the Blue Ridge Parkway also transverse the western mountains. Due to the spectacular views and the forest beauty, this region is also a popular recreation and retirement community. Last fall, a large fire occurred on the Shenandoah National Park near Luray, Virginia. The fire burned 24,500 acres of which 1,200 acres was on private land. The fire impacted several communities, threatened homes along the park boundary and burned into three counties. While this fire was small by western standards, a small fire in the east can threaten a large number of

homes very rapidly. This reinforces the need for training, equipment, and close cooperation to stop fires with a rapid and efficient initial attack.

The National Fire Plan provides additional funding through Title IV competitive grants for Preparedness, Hazard Mitigation and Volunteer Fire Assistance. Virginia received \$269,650 in additional funds for Preparedness. The purpose of these funds is to protect natural resources on state and private lands. This will be accomplished through fire prevention efforts, providing suppression assistance to the State's rural volunteer fire departments, and maintaining initial attack capability to keep forest fires small. The Federal funds are cost-shared with state and local funds. Virginia specifically plans to use these funds for the purchase of personal protective equipment for part-time Hot Shot Crews and full-time employees, upgrade helicopter buckets, purchase fire prevention equipment and to increase volunteer fire department training.

Virginia received two competitive grants for Hazard Mitigation totaling \$537,575. The objective of the larger grant, named Project Riskwise, is to locate and rate all woodland home communities in the interface areas of the State. Those communities adjacent to federal lands will receive high priority. The project will determine the hazard rating of each individual community. The surrounding forestland will be rated for fuel types, probability of ignition, community values, past fire history, and available suppression resources. This information will be stored on a Geographic Information System. Those communities exhibiting high risk values will be contacted and additional mitigation and fire prevention activities will be instigated. This will be accomplished with a partnership with the local volunteer fire departments, USDA Forest Service, National Park Service, and US Fish and Wildlife. The Department of Forestry expects to initiate the mitigation phase in the Northern Shenandoah Valley. In conjunction with a special Potomac Watershed Partnership grant, we are able to expand this effort and have already identified communities at risk.

A statewide Geographic Information System map will be created to be used in future decision making for volunteer fire department grants, excess property assignments, and the location of community dry hydrants. We can also focus on future needs for fire prevention and mitigation projects. Those communities rated as high risk because of high hazard fuel loads will be given future priority on suppression resource assignments, fire prevention activities and grants.

One project of the second grant under mitigation is to use the popular Imax movie Wildfire: Feel the Heat as a drawing card for a major community awareness program. This event is targeted to a broad audience and will appeal to adults, the fire services community and the local school districts. The three-month showing will provide a unique opportunity to educate children in local schools. The movie will be featured at the Science Museum of Western Virginia in Roanoke City. The objective is to educate community decision makers and school-aged children about fire danger in the Wildland Urban Interface. A secondary objective is to introduce our target audience to professional wildland firefighters and the methods used to suppress fires. The Roanoke Valley community was selected because of its location in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. The population of Roanoke and surrounding counties is 220,000. Over 60 percent of the area is forested. The area is rapidly spreading into the rural countryside and has been the target of several innovative urban programs including Project Impact. Over 80 woodland home developments have been identified in this area. Roanoke is also the headquarters for the George Washington-Jefferson National Forest. The Blue Ridge Parkway passes through the area. Urban growth along the National Park boundary has been an issue in the past. The Roanoke Valley area has been subjected to many of the natural disasters mentioned earlier and a 1,200 acre fire just outside the city clearly demonstrated critical risk of the wildland urban interface.

The Volunteer Fire Assistance grant was increased this year to \$77,000 and an additional \$116,400 in funding was added through Title IV funding. This vitally important grant improves the capability and effectiveness of Virginia's 543 Rural Volunteer Fire Departments to protect lives and other rural investments. The purpose of this program is to provide financial, technical and other assistance to State Foresters to organize, train, and equip fire departments in rural

communities. Last year, the Department of Forestry, through this grant, was able to assist 74 rural volunteer fire departments. This program has been severely under-funded. The current level of funding using both the Title II and additional Title IV funding is a welcome improvement. However, to continue to replace worn and damaged equipment and provide an effective level of training, this funding level should be maintained and increased whenever possible. Virginia will purchase training materials to be used with the volunteer fire department; however, the largest portion of the funding will be made available in grants directly to the local volunteer fire departments. Applications for grants have already been mailed.

The last program that forms the Cooperative Fire Program is the Federal Excess Property Program (FEPP) The USDA Forest Service is charged with assuring that excess federal property is acquired, used, managed, and disposed of in accordance with federal laws and regulations. Federal excess personal property is loaned to state forestry agencies and their cooperators for wildland and rural community fire protection. It is imperative that the State Foresters continue to be able to acquire this property and distribute it to needy rural volunteer fire departments in a logical and fair manner.

Recently, additional funds have been offered through the Economic Action Plan. These small competitive grants focus on three areas of concern. High Risk Areas projects support diversified uses of forest resources. Materials removed during fuel reduction and hazard mitigation activities represent an opportunity for the private sector to utilize this wood in a useful manner. Community Planning for Fire Protection will also address the need for developing strategic action and wildfire risk plans. The effort will assist communities expand their economic ability by providing improved fire safe developments. In Virginia, the majority of the funds will be used to reduce fuels and fire hazards in high risk areas, while trying to develop markets for the materials removed. The desired outcome of this project is to reduce the forest fire risk to life and property and develop new jobs and products from hazard reduction work. The lessons learned from these small pilot projects will allow us to maximize funds from the National Fire Plan. We will be able to work in unison with federal agencies, state agencies, local

governments, community leaders, and the private sector. This effort will maintain Virginia's high quality of life. Together we will better protect our citizens and their property and sustain our environmental quality of air, water, wildlife, and outdoor recreation.

Virginia has not had such an opportunity before to conduct the necessary level of planning to assist the local community to assist themselves. The specific actions and priorities in FY 2002 will be to begin the implementation of Community Fire Plans identifying the Firewise needs, specific mitigation projects and the suppression response needs of "communities at risk". Combining the objectives of the Hazard Mitigation, Preparedness and Economic Action initiatives Virginia proposes to develop WUI Community Fire, Logistics, Action, Mitigation and Education Plans (FLAME) beginning with those communities most at risk from wildland fire and those adjacent to federal lands.

We have excitement. We have bonded partnerships. We have the opportunity to make Virginia a safer place. We will work together to clearly demonstrate how the creative use of federal dollars can be leveraged into a working model for others to follow.